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## THE FIRST CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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SHIRLEY JACKSON CASE

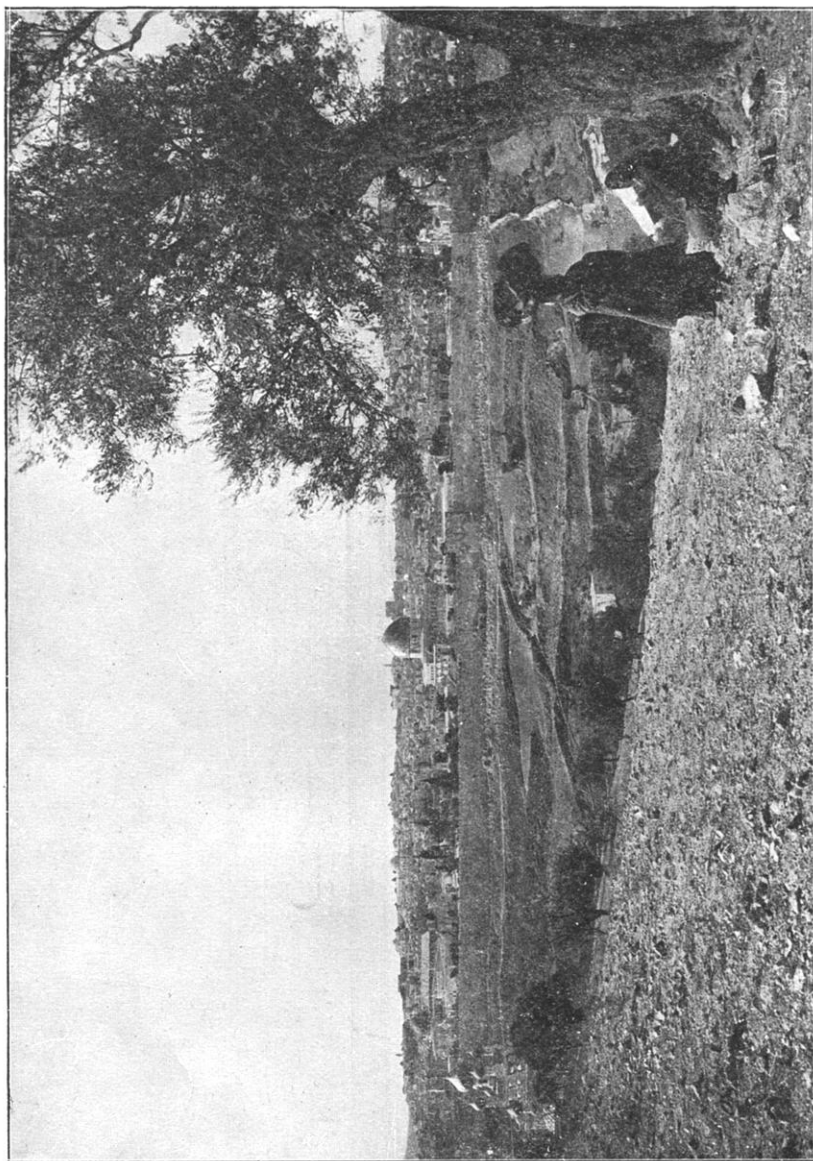
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It is a well-known fact that some of Jesus' followers recovered from the shock of his death and reassembled under the reviving influence of belief in his resurrection. In its early days this company included, among others, the faithful eleven, certain women, and some of Jesus' immediate relatives, in all about one hundred and twenty persons (Acts 1:14 f.). These must soon have been joined by others, for at a very early date the number was upward of five hundred (I Cor. 15:5-7). It is this growing assembly, particularly as described in the first five chapters of Acts, to which the designation "First Christian Community" is here applied.

No first-hand information regarding these primitive days in the history of the church has come down to us. Would that some member of the community—Peter or John or one of Jesus' relatives—had left an autographic account of the period! But this has not been done, and we must glean as best we can such information as the secondary sources supply, and even this is comparatively meager in extent. Nevertheless we may approach the narrative of Acts, chaps. 1-5, which is almost our sole authority for the period, with the assurance that, save for its brevity, the information there given is fairly reliable.

A word regarding the author and his historical situation may aid us in estimating the value of his testimony and in understanding its significance. On the basis of statements in Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1 it is evident that the same person wrote both the Third Gospel and the Book of Acts, and tradition has commonly called him Luke, the companion of Paul (Col. 4:14; II Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). Whether this tradition is true or not, the author was evidently one who had no personal touch with the primitive community, and who wrote up its history perhaps sixty or more years after the occurrence of the events; but he testifies that he piously purposed to write



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accurately, and with this end in view had investigated the facts so far as he deemed it necessary and so far as means of information were available (Luke 1:1-4). Indeed scholars find evidence that he had early sources, either written or oral, or perhaps both, which he incorporated in his narrative; yet it must be granted that he worked all his source material over from his own point of view, placing his own interpretation upon it after the manner of every sincere historian, and he did this not in order to pervert the truth but to make it more emphatic to his most excellent Theophilus. Thus we are to see the life of the early Christians through the eyes of this later historian, the author of Acts. Sometimes the question may arise, Does the author's point of view ever differ from that of his source? Is the significance of an incident different for him and for the community, and may it be still further different for us? In a study of this sort one ought always to be on the alert, first, to find out just what the author means to tell his readers, then to discover whether any distinction is to be drawn between the original event and his interpretation of it, and further to note the significance of the event for the community.

The initial period in the community's life extended from Jesus' first resurrection appearance to Pentecost, an interval of seven weeks. Acts covers this in a single chapter which falls into four sections: vss. 1-5, 6-11, 12-14, 15-26. The opening paragraph is recapitulatory, recalling the attention of Theophilus to facts already presented in the gospel: the appearances of Jesus, his association with the disciples and separation from them, and his command that they tarry in Jerusalem (Luke 24:13-51). In Acts the appearances are made to continue for the space of forty days while the gospel record seems to include only those of the day of resurrection.

The second section deals with a single incident. On a certain occasion when Jesus was with them the disciples asked if the Israelites were soon to be delivered from the yoke of the heathen and to have their own nation exalted to a position of world empire. They were told that it is not for them to know the time, that meanwhile they are to evangelize and when the time for miraculous interference in the world-order arrives they will see a vision similar to Daniel's (Dan. 7: 13 f.) in which the one who appears on the clouds will be this same

Jesus who has left them. Just where the incident thus recorded belongs in point of time is uncertain. Sometimes it is assumed to have fallen near the end of the forty days, while others think it to be a more detailed account of the event mentioned in Luke 24: 50-52, which took place on the evening of the day Jesus arose from the dead. The latter is more probable. The opening clause of vs. 6 does not state any definite time at which they came together, while the question they asked is one of the first that would spring to the disciples' lips as their faith in the risen Jesus began to be interpreted (cf. Luke 24:21). The question was prompted by Jesus' command to remain in Jerusalem until the gift of the spirit was received, from which they inferred that this would be the time when the kingdom would be restored, and since the promise of the spirit was the reason for the sojourn in Jerusalem (cf. Luke 24:49) it must have occurred at the beginning of the period. But are we not to assume that the so-called ascension took place on the fortieth day, after which the appearances of Jesus ceased, and that Acts 1:9 records this event? In addition to the reasons already given for assigning this part of Acts to an earlier date, is the lack of convincing authority for speaking of *the* Ascension as distinct from other occasions when Jesus, after one of his post-resurrection appearances, had vanished from the disciples' vision. Paul knows no such event, nor can his catalogue of appearances be confined within a forty-day period (I Cor. 15:5-8); the First Gospel is silent upon the point, and though the Fourth Gospel differentiates the idea of ascension it places it soon after the resurrection, at least before the eighth day, if permission to touch Jesus is to be taken as any evidence (John 20:17, 27). Moreover Acts 1:2 states that "he was received up" after he had commanded the apostles to remain in Jerusalem, and then goes on (vs. 3) to speak of appearances which presumably occurred subsequently. The choice of a successor to Judas took place after Jesus was "received up" (Acts 1:22), but it may have fallen near the beginning since the narrative places it in no definite time, but only in "these days" (vs. 15); and if the appearances had ceased when the brethren as yet numbered only about one hundred and twenty (Acts 1:15) how could Paul have mentioned an appearance to above five hundred brethren at once, declaring also that most of those who had witnessed the vision were

still alive (I. Cor. 15:6)? No doubt the first disciples were at one in their belief in the heavenly exaltation of Jesus, but there is no evidence of any such uniformity of opinion regarding the theory of a forty-day interim between his resurrection and exaltation.

Vss. 12-14 introduce the reader to the inner circle of the company in Jerusalem, while vss. 15-26 describe in greater detail an early incident in their life, the election of a successor to Judas. Though the author has added explanatory remarks for the benefit of his gentile readers (e. g., vss. 18 f. and possibly vs. 20), the true Jewish coloring of the primitive life has been preserved. The usual place of assembly was "the upper room." Perhaps it was here that Jesus and the Twelve had eaten the last supper, and this room may have been in the house of Mary the mother of Mark (Acts 12:12). Just when the disciples first reassembled in Jerusalem is uncertain. Matthew 28:16 f. (cf. Mark 16:7) makes Galilee the scene of the first gathering, but the third evangelist gives no hint either in the gospel or in Acts of a return to Galilee, and in fact seems to reject the idea (Luke 24:7). The instruction given on the first day in Luke 24:49 requires that all (vs. 33) remain in Jerusalem until Pentecost, and there is nowhere any intimation in Luke-Acts that they were disobedient. John says nothing of a Galilean visit except in the so-called appendix (chap. 21). Since John 21:3 shows the disciples returning to their former occupations, probably, if representing any original incident, it is really another witness for the early return to Galilee. Under these circumstances it is impossible to determine how long a time the disciples spent in Jerusalem before Pentecost. Items of geography and chronology were so insignificant in comparison with the all-engrossing content of their new hope that these minor matters received slight attention, consequently even as early as the close of the first century uniform tradition regarding these details was not available.

That which is of chief religious significance in this early period is the disciples' faith in their risen and ascended Lord. During Jesus' earthly career they had listened to his words and heeded his bidding without possessing any vigorous religious life of their own. Rather indifferently had they witnessed his struggle on the last night of his earthly life (Mark 14:32-42), not only failing to realize for themselves

that vital experience which he desired to have them feel, but failing utterly to appreciate in any sympathetic way the significance of his experience. Their hour was not yet come. Not until the shadow of the cross fell upon them did they begin to awake to the situation. In the days which followed, their whole religious thinking came to have a new content as their confidence in the resurrection of Jesus became confirmed. Religion was no longer a matter of mere external relations; it came to rest fundamentally upon personal trust, supported by faith in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. The externals, with some of the old emphasis too, were still retained, but superior to all this was their inner religious awakening brought about by their recent experiences. They now had a firm religious conviction that their lost cause had become one of assured triumph because their Master now sat upon God's right hand. While succeeding generations have not always been able to accept the primitive ideas regarding the way in which that triumph was to be manifested—through Jesus' return upon the clouds and the accompanying miraculous display—they have continued to emulate this early confidence in God as revealed to men in the life and ministry of Jesus. Religiously the first disciples were new men when they saw the Lord, and the reviving power of such a vision has not yet grown ineffective.

Pentecost marked a new epoch in the life of the community. Two events of great importance then occurred: the descent of the spirit (Acts 2:1-21) and the beginning of public preaching (Acts 2:22-41). The first of these, according to the writer of Acts, resulted in the miraculous ability to speak foreign languages. The gift of tongues was not an uncommon phenomenon in New Testament times, but only here is it given the mechanical instead of the religious interpretation. The Corinthians were experts in the use of this gift, yet Paul claimed still greater proficiency for himself (I Cor. 14:18). Since he professed to be a master in the art we may look to him to tell us its significance, especially since he devotes a whole chapter to the subject (I Cor., chap. 14). "Tongues" is a charismatic endowment but of only secondary worth, for no man understandeth the utterance (vss. 2, 19) not even the one uttering it (vs. 14). Those within the church regard these incomprehensible ejaculations as evidence of true religious ecstasy, but as of no value for the edification

of the brethren unless someone in a normal condition can furnish an interpretation of the ecstatic's actions (vs. 28); while the unbeliever interprets the demonstration as an evidence of madness (vs. 23). Therefore Paul discourages the cultivation of such unintelligible emotional displays in favor of the edifying exhortation of the prophet, in order that all things might be done "decently and in order" (vss. 39 f.). Hence it would seem that the author of Acts misunderstood the phenomenon, as he well might have done if he had no personal acquaintance with the practice, which seems to have ceased at an early date. Moreover the context is against his interpretation. If the utterances had been perfectly intelligible, and if that fact had been commented upon openly (Acts 2:8), the charge of drunkenness would have no point (vs. 13), but if the disciples had been indulging in an ecstatic display of emotion outsiders may indeed have thought them filled with new wine (cf. I Cor. 14:23). Furthermore it is the latter charge only to which Peter refers in his apology, and by citing in defense the words of Joel he brings this ecstatic phenomenon and the Christian gift of prophecy into close proximity, similar to that in which they stand in I Cor., chap. 14. The author of Acts, then, desiring to make clear to Theophilus the ambiguous reference to speaking with tongues, elucidated the matter, as he supposed, by inserting vss. 5-12 and adding the word "other" in vss. 4 and 13. But the true significance of this event for the community was much more deeply religious than he imagined. The believers were at this time, and presumably on many subsequent occasions (cf. Acts 4:31; 10:45 f.; 11:15), so completely overwhelmed by the sense of the divine presence that they were carried high above the plane of normal life, even their very reason being temporarily swept from its moorings. We live in a very different age when emotions are less ebullient and psychical phenomena are better understood, but we prize none the less highly a vital consciousness of God's presence, though the sense of that presence may impel us into very different lines of activity.

After Peter had refuted the unjust accusation against his brethren he proceeded to expound the content of the new faith. His main thesis was: Jesus is the divinely appointed messianic prophet. This was proved by the mighty works God wrought through him during his lifetime; his miraculous resurrection to which David as well as the

disciples bore testimony was further evidence of the divine approval, and God's final favor was seen in Jesus' heavenly exaltation which David had predicted and which the recent outpouring of the spirit attested. Then came the climax in Peter's discourse. If his argument thus far was valid the new messianic age was now impending, and it behooved all men to repent in order to save themselves from the present "crooked generation" before the Lord came in judgment. By repenting of sins and uniting with the new community they would be assured of salvation on "that great and notable day" (vss. 20 f.), and would enjoy in the meantime the personal assurance given by the Holy Spirit (vs. 38). While the first believers thus appear as men of rich spiritual life they are still men whose mental vision is bounded by the Jewish horizon of their own day, and they illustrate the fact that each age interprets the content of its religious life in terms of contemporary thinking. They had gripped anew the thought that God cared for men, even to the extent of especially revealing himself unto them through Jesus, and forthwith they cast the idea into the mold of apocalyptic Judaism. We cannot accept their phrasing, although we still hold the idea itself as a priceless treasure of religious thinking.

After some days (how many we cannot say) Peter and John are introduced in the rôle of miracle-workers (Acts 3:1 ff.). It was a common thing for the disciples to go up to the temple (cf. Luke 22:53; Acts 2:46; 5:21, 42) and this lame man was daily stationed at the gate, so Peter and John had probably seen him there on previous occasions. We do not know just what the determining circumstances were which made this meeting issue so differently from the previous ones. The authenticity of the miracle has sometimes been questioned. In all probability the author of Acts would not be entirely free from the bias of that age which inclined to exaggerate, with intentions that were honest enough to be sure, the importance of the miraculous; but acquaintance with details and liveliness in narration distinguish this account from other instances where he does seem to make generalizations on his own initiative (cf. 2:43; 5:12, 15 f.; 6:8; 8:7, 13). In this instance he probably is in the main relying for information upon some source. We can believe this the more readily since Paul testifies that miracles of healing were among his charis-

matic endowments (II Cor. 12:12; Rom. 15:19; cf. Acts 14:10; 28:8), and other Christians of the first generation at least seem to have shared the same (I Cor. 12:9, 28, 30; Gal. 3:5; Acts 9:34, 40; Matt. 10:1; Heb. 2:4; Jas. 5:15). In fact every age knows such possibilities when the necessary psychological conditions are satisfied. Even in modern times cripples have been known to forsake their crutches at the shrine of some saint. This particular event seems to have had very little religious significance for the early Christians, but it did possess great apologetic value and gave Peter another opportunity to preach before the multitude. The content of his sermon is substantially the same as on the day of Pentecost, with the additional thought that such a mighty work as had just been witnessed was further evidence that God had glorified Jesus.

As a result of the disturbance which followed, Peter and John were arrested and brought to trial (Acts 4:1-32). This, so far as we are able to judge, was an entirely new experience for the church. Up to this time there seems to have been no perceptible breach between the Christians and their fellow Jews, and on this occasion it is noticeable that the interfering party is not the Pharisees but the Sadducees. The former had been Jesus' bitter opponents, but they seem to have cherished no particular animosity toward his disciples, and had they been inclined to do so the disciples' loyalty to Jewish customs in these early days would have tended to make the relations friendly. It was not until Grecian Jews of Stephen's type began to hint that the observance of Jewish ritual might be relatively unimportant for Christians that the Pharisees' hatred toward the new movement was aroused. In the meantime it was the civil authorities who interfered, and not for religious reasons either. It seemed to the author that the Sadducees' hatred was probably kindled by the disciples' doctrine of the resurrection (Acts 4:2). This supposition was a very natural one for him to make, for Paul and the later church maintained that one of the first deductions to be drawn from Jesus' resurrection was the doctrine of the resurrection of believers. But with the primitive Christians, if we are to trust the underlying sources of Acts (cf. 2:21, 40; 3:20 f.; 4:11 f.), it was the idea of Jesus' return to men who were now living which received chief emphasis and which the idea of Jesus' resurrection was made to support. The Sadducees were much more

anxious to stand in favor with Rome than to repress theological dogma, and while the Romans cared very little about the religious tenets of any Jew, they were always on the alert to check excitable mobs, since they well knew that Jewish religious fervor might at any moment flame into revolt. They would be particularly suspicious if the instigators of the mob were thought to exercise any sort of secret magical powers that might be employed to win the confidence of the credulous multitude. This is the historical background of the present incident. Peter and John are arrested as disturbers of the peace. Their questioners never refer to the matter of resurrection, but they examine them carefully to determine whether they have stirred up excitement through the practice of any illegitimate arts. As no sufficient charge can be proved against them they are released and commanded to incite no further trouble.

Acts 5:17-41 relates a second conflict with the authorities in which "the apostles" are the victims. They are incarcerated, during the night they are miraculously released, in the morning they are arrested again and brought before the council, where they are accused of disobeying the command to refrain from preaching. They present a brief defense which so angers the council that a death penalty is proposed, but the lenient caution of Gamaliel prevails and they escape with a beating only. The author's source of information for this incident, if indeed he had any, must have been much less satisfactory than for the first arrest and trial. There he was able to name a specific event which precipitated the action of the rulers, but here he relies upon what seems to be his own idealizing inference about the growing popularity of Peter as a miracle-worker (Acts 5:12-16) to furnish the incentive for action. In this connection the originality of the miraculous release from prison also is doubtful. Though the authorities are made to recognize its wonderful character (vs. 24*b*), it does not deter the officers from making a second arrest, nor is it noticed at the trial. The apostles are neither charged with breaking prison nor credited with possessing God's special favor. And still more difficult is it to believe that an early source would make Gamaliel refer to the rebellion of Theudas ten years or more before that event had taken place, nor would it be apt to make him say that the uprising headed by Judas of Galilee followed that of Theudas when in reality

it preceded it by about forty years. The technical use of the term "apostle" as here employed to designate the twelve did not arise until the days of Paul's controversy with the Jewish branch of the church, and the idea of suffering for the "Name" (Acts 5:41) was not a familiar form of persecution before Domitian's time at least (81-96 A. D.). Whatever may have been the particulars of the original event, it seems highly probable that its description in Acts is a late and elaborated form of the tradition. Nevertheless the essential significance of both this and the previous incident is fairly clear: the disciples are loyal to their Master and persist in obeying the voice of God regardless of the hardships involved. Their opponents do not begin to fathom the secret depths of the believer's new life nor to appreciate its irresistible spiritual power—a power which ultimately conquered the very Roman Empire.

The story of the first community would be incomplete without a final glimpse of the inner life of the brotherhood. The references to it are brief and sometimes seem to be incidental comments of the author rather than a part of his sources (Luke 24:53; Acts 1:13 f.; 2:42, 44-47; 4:23-37; 5:1-12). Yet a fairly consistent picture is presented. The members call themselves brethren, they spend much time in prayer and worship, they retain their Jewish manner of life, as many as were so disposed sold their goods and shared the proceeds with their poorer friends but there was no compulsion about the matter (Acts 5:4), they broke bread together in memory of their former fellowship with Jesus, and together they recalled the words and works of his earthly career. But despite the sincere piety with which they are justly credited, ambition and avarice found their way within even this charmed circle. The familiar story of Ananias and Sapphira is too true to the weakness of human nature to be doubted, but it is hard to believe that Acts describes the incident in its original unembellished form. As it now stands it seems tragic and unreal. The precision with which the actors drop dead at Peter's word shows some dramatic skill on the part of the narrator but does not approve itself to the historic sense of the reader, nor accord with the ethical ideas which we feel compelled to associate with all actions for which the Almighty is primarily responsible. Nor is the impression of originality strengthened by the sweeping generalizations of the

context (vss. 12-16). The signs and wonders are "many" though not one is specified, those who believe are multitudes, even Peter's shadow has miraculous power, and of the throng of sick not a single person is left unhealed. But it is not impossible to account for the present form of the story. We may believe that the early Christians practiced anathematizing, taking it over from the synagogue. Paul surely exercised this prerogative (I Cor. 5:3-5; 16:22; Gal. 1:19). The person upon whom the curse was pronounced was excluded from the fellowship of the community, was handed over to Satan, and death might be expected as the result. Thus this case of deception on the part of Ananias and his wife may have led the impetuous Peter to excommunicate them, and if their death followed either soon or some time afterward the fact would be interpreted superstitiously and the lapse of a generation or two in those primitive times would easily account for the present heightened coloring of the story. Thus understood, the incident gains both in fidelity to the character of the first Christians and in pungency for the religious thought of today. The genuine Christian spirit never has and never can harbor dishonesty of purpose and deliberate deceit.